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A Primer for the Employment of Marine Aviation In the Joint Environment
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The employment of Marine aviation in the joint environment, particularly Marine tactical aviation (TacAir), is often misunderstood not only by those in other Services but also within the Corps itself. It is incumbent upon all Marine officers working at the joint and component staff levels to have a clear understanding of, and the ability to articulate, the individual Service and joint doctrine that drives and supports the employment of Marine aviation in the joint environment. The concepts presented in this article pertain primarily to the employment of organic TacAir assets even though they have general applicability to all aspects of Marine aviation, including rotary-wing assets and the Marine Air Command and Control System (MACCS).

The first level of understanding is so rudimentary that its mention borders on insult to the professional Marine officer. However, for the joint staff officer who is not a Marine, it is also the first building block of understanding in the primer on this subject. The basic tenet that we are organized, trained, and equipped to fight as a Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) is the essential element of Marine Corps doctrine that other servicemembers must understand. Since all Services write their own doctrine based on their given roles and functions, and thus organize, train, and equip accordingly, military professionals assigned to joint staffs and component staffs within joint task forces (JTFs) should not have difficulty understanding the logic behind Marine Corps combat organization. Emphasis on Marine organization should highlight the fact that a large percentage of a Marine expeditionary force's (MEF's) firepower comes from the aviation combat element (ACE). Therefore, it is imperative to make every effort to maintain the synergy attained with our basic warfighting structure, the MAGTF. If this basic tenet of Marine Corps doctrine is violated then the joint force commander (JFC) or unified commander (CinC) puts that warfighting synergy at risk. The result is a reduction in effectiveness of the Marine component and calls into question its ability to accomplish JFC-assigned missions. While it is the JFC's prerogative to reorganize as he sees fit, joint doctrine offers cautionary advice to combatant commanders concerning changing Service combat organizational designs.

The Guidance of Joint Doctrine

The need to maintain basic Service warfighting structure is clearly recognized in joint doctrine. Joint Pub 3.0, Doctrine for Joint Operations, states: JFCs [and CinCs] should allow Service tactical and operational groupings to function generally as they are designed. The intent is to meet the needs of the JFC while maintaining the tactical and operational integrity of Service organizations.² These aren't merely words to appease the individual Services and protect "turf." It is recognition by the Joint Staff and the Chairman that Services can better accomplish their assigned missions for a combatant commander when they are not sent piecemeal into the fight by strict functional guidelines. It matters not whether the combatant commander organizes his forces along functional or Service lines, the integrity of warfighting units is

not only possible but also most desirable. Certainly, some Services lend themselves more to a functional organization than others do, most notably the Air Force as a joint force air component command (JFACC). When a JTF commander decides there is a need to establish a functional component such as JFACC, it is likely, due to the preponderance of assets, that the Air Force will have the responsibility of leading it. This does not mean all Services' air capabilities are automatically assigned to the JFACC for operational control (OpCon). It does mean that all joint sorties made available (from air capable component resources) to the JFC for tasking by the JFACC are for the purpose of meeting the JFC's overall objectives. This is, at most, a tactical control relationship effective for the 24-hour duration of a specific air tasking order (ATO) where a functional component commander exercises control over military capability or forces made available for tasking.³ In this case it is a capability (sorties) made available from Service organic resources. Component commanders still maintain OpCon of their organic aviation assets and employ them in direct support in order to accomplish their respective missions as assigned by the JFC. Naturally, the JFC has the prerogative to distribute assets as he sees fit, but he must first consider how such a decision affects the ability of the contributing component commander to accomplish his mission. This discussion is applicable not only to the Marine Corps but also to all components that possess air capabilities and forces.

Command and Control of Joint Air Operations

The most important document guiding the employment of Marine aviation in a joint environment is Joint Pub 3-56.1, Command and Control for Joint Air Operations. This is "must reading" for all Marine officers working on JTF and CinC staffs. It succinctly outlines JFACC responsibilities and the obligations air capable components must fulfill in order to employ their organic aviation effectively in joint operations. One of the most important aspects of this guidance is the requirement for air capable components to

. . . provide the JFACC a description of their direct support plan [DSP] to allow for coordination and deconfliction of targeting efforts between each component and within the JFC staff and agencies.⁴ . . . targets scheduled for deliberate attack by component air capabilities/forces should be included on the ATO . . . for deconfliction and coordination . . . therefore components should provide a description of their direct support plan through the liaison elements within the JAOC [Joint Air Operations Center].⁵

Whether the medium to transmit this plan to the JFACC is verbal or written is a component commander's decision. That may depend on how comfortable he feels with the experience and knowledge level of the liaisons he has representing him at the JFACC and their ability to articulate his plan. In some situations he may choose to present his plan to the JFACC commander personally.⁶ Regardless, the DSP for Marine Force (MarFor)⁷ will always incorporate some basic, unchanging elements.

Direct Support Plan Elements

There is no generic DSP that covers all situations. Different JFC organization, mission assignment, and geographic considerations make it impossible to produce one Marine DSP that addresses all possibilities. There are, however, some enduring general principles we can follow that provide a framework for all DSPs.

The first and most important element of any DSP is the Marine commander's intent to retain OpCon of his aviation capability/forces. This is necessary to maintain the integrity of our basic "Service tactical and operational grouping," the MAGTF. The JFACC commander must understand from the outset that the MarFor component commander (ComMarFor) intends to exercise his prerogative to retain OpCon of his air capability and forces throughout the campaign. Anything less jeopardizes the ability of the Marine commander to accomplish his mission as assigned by the JFC. This does not mean the MarFor will not contribute to the joint air effort, quite the contrary, at times the Marine aviation effort will focus exclusively on the JFACC objectives as assigned by the JFC.

It is possible that Marine aviation will be "first to fight" in today's most conceivable major regional contingencies well ahead of other elements of the MAGTF. This leads us to the second major element of a DSP. Prior to assignment of ground combat responsibilities, since the MarFor requires no direct support sorties or shaping operations, all MarFor sorties should be made available to the JFC for tasking by the JFACC in support of the JFC's overall objectives and campaign plan. In essence, in this situation, all Marine sorties may be excess and available to the JFC for tasking by the JFACC. In the early stages of a conflict this can mean 100 percent of MarFor available air capability and forces. This fulfills the ComMarFor's obligation to report "... excess sorties not required by the air capable component and available for tasking by the JFACC ..."⁸ The requirement to report excess sorties throughout the campaign remains valid whether or not the ComMarFor has ground combat responsibilities. It is likely, however, that during the thick of the ground battle ComMarFor will not have excess sorties available. This leads to the next point in the DSP.

It is necessary for the ComMarFor to express his intent to use organic aviation assets in direct support of his forces in order to accomplish his JFC-assigned mission in the designated MarFor area of operations (AO). This third major element of the DSP serves to inform the JFACC of the ComMarFor's intent to use most, and possibly all, of his aviation forces in direct support when assigned ground combat responsibilities. "Direct support sorties" is the commonly used term to describe "... those air capabilities/forces organic to a component that are used by the component to accomplish its assigned mission."⁹ Whether these direct support sorties are used to address close air support (CAS), interdiction, or other categories of air operations in the MarFor AO, they are not part of the joint air operations effort.¹⁰ Certainly, they are part of the JFC's overall effort and support mission accomplishment by one of his components. Even so, this can become a contentious issue when other components that do not possess organic air capability must rely on joint sorties provided by the JFACC to accomplish their missions.

The Marines' capability to conduct their own air support is sometimes viewed by other components as an "unfair" advantage and not properly balanced with the JFC's priorities. This perception is hard to dispel when, as an example, there are times that the main effort may receive fewer CAS sorties than the Marine component is flying in support of itself while conducting a supporting attack. In this case the JFC is the only one who can truly dispel this perception and resolve the conflict. ComMarFors understand and endorse the JFC's prerogative to "... reassign, redirect, or reallocate a components direct support air capabilities/forces."¹¹ If the JFC thinks another component requires

more support than the JFACC can provide with the joint sorties available, he can direct the MarFor to contribute sorties to the joint air effort. However, before he makes that decision, prudence dictates that he consult the ComMarFor and assess the impact such a reallocation will have on the ability of the MarFor to accomplish the JFC-assigned mission. If the JFC is willing to accept the ramifications, then the Marines are obliged to furnish the desired number of sorties required. It makes good sense for a DSP to include an acknowledgment of, and support for, this basic tenet of joint operations.

The JFC is also entitled to, and the MarFor is obligated to furnish, what are sometimes informally referred to as “up-front sorties.” Specifically, they are categorized as long-range reconnaissance, long-range interdiction, and air defense. This aspect of employing Marine aviation in the joint environment has its origins in what is referred to as the “Omnibus Agreement” written in the mid-1980s. More correctly known as the policy for command and control of Marine Corps TacAir during sustained operations ashore, this policy is now covered in Joint Publication 0-2, Unified Action Armed Forces.¹² The same cautionary advice offered in the previous paragraph also applies in this situation. Whether sorties are provided up-front or in the course of emergent battlefield situations, the potential impact on the MarFor’s ability to accomplish its mission requires careful assessment.

Battlefield Geometry, Targeting, and Direct Support Sorties

Subelements of the ComMarFor’s intent (to use his organic aviation assets in direct support) are required to give the JFACC a comprehensive understanding of the DSP as it relates to targeting and the use of direct support sorties. The extra detail provided assumes a working knowledge of the command relationships established by the JFC and the battlefield geometry that defines individual component AOs. For purposes of our primer, a short discussion is necessary on battlefield geometry, its effect in command relationships, and the authority of commanders within their respective AOs.

When ComMarFor is assigned ground combat responsibilities, he is usually assigned an AO defined by boundaries with adjacent components and units. These boundaries, combined with fire support coordination measures, such as the fire support coordination line (FSCL) comprise what is sometimes informally referred to as battlefield geometry. This construct enables the JFC to manage the theater by assigning component commanders missions and objectives in order to accomplish the larger JFC mission. It also determines the most critical command relationship within a JTF theater of operations by defining where on the battlefield a given land or naval force component commander is the designated supported commander.¹³ In this area “. . . the supported commander will have the authority to exercise general direction of the supporting effort.”¹⁴ Commanders responsible for exercising general direction over the supporting effort do so by:

. . . synchronization of maneuver, fires, and interdiction. To facilitate this synchronization, such commanders designate the target priority, effects, and timing of interdiction operations within their AOs.¹⁵

Finally, battlefield geometry further defines where the interdiction effort is conducted and thus where targets must be prioritized and nominated, specifically, beyond the FSCL.

Targeting is an integral part of the DSP. The ComMarFor responsibility to exercise general direction over the supporting effort includes an obligation to deconflict operations with supporting components. This makes it incumbent on the MarFor to

identify the targets it intends to strike with organic capabilities and forces to the joint targeting coordination board (JTCB). This is accomplished with a document called the direct support target list. This list identifies targets beyond the FSCL that do not require consideration at the JFC level except for the purpose of deconfliction. Other targets of interest to ComMarFor that are either outside his AO, or are beyond his capability to strike within his AO (mainly due to limited assets), should be identified and submitted on a separate nomination list. This list of targets competes at the JTCB for prioritization and sourcing with JFACC furnished assets. The key word is competes. These targets are evaluated based on their merit. How well they are “nested” with the CinC’s objectives has a direct effect on where they stand on the joint integrated prioritized targeting list (JIPTL) for a given day. What should become obvious to Marine component targeteers is that the targets most important to ComMarFor—the ones he feels must be struck for mission success in his AO that day—should appear on the direct support target list. The justification for constructing the direct support target list in this fashion is MarFor’s capability to address those targets with direct support sorties from organic assets of the MAGTF ACE.

To close the discussion on targeting we should note battlefield geometry also generally determines what kinds of missions (CAS, interdiction, counterair, etc.) are flown in a particular area and where it is necessary to nominate targets for deliberate attack. Just remember, sorties the component commander flies within that AO, with his organic capabilities and forces, are by definition direct support sorties, regardless of what type of mission is flown, be it CAS, interdiction, or counterair. The importance of the FSCL comes into play when the target nomination process begins. Targets short of the FSCL are not nominated to the JTCB. They are simply attacked with organic capabilities and forces (to include direct support sorties), or with joint capabilities and forces provided to the supported commander. As stated earlier, targets beyond the FSCL must be nominated to the JTCB for the purpose of deconfliction and coordination. This coordination must take place to avoid fratricide and to efficiently use organic and joint capabilities and forces to address the enemy threat. With this basic understanding of battlefield geometry, command relationships, and targeting, it is not difficult to articulate the necessary details of the MarFor DSP to the JFACC.

One final subelement is required to complete the DSP. No MAGTF commander can manage all aspects of the battle without the MACCS. It is the major element that enables him to exercise “general direction” over the supporting air effort in his AO. The methodology of MACCS integration into the joint command and control architecture is easier than it first appears. In most cases the JFACC will act as the airspace control authority (ACA) and the area air defense coordinator (AADC). This does not mean he must manage all airspace within the theater or joint operations area with JFACC assets. He will get assistance from the air control agencies of other Services in order to accomplish his ACA responsibility. In the case of the Marine component, the MACCS will most typically manage a sector of airspace over the MarFor AO for the ACA. The details of such an arrangement require agreement between the ACA and the MarFor. While those details ultimately require incorporation into the airspace control plan and airspace control order, an outline of the general understanding should comprise the final element of the DSP.

Tying It All Together

The details of employing Marine aviation in the joint environment have many more complex aspects. This was not an attempt to cover them all. As in any primer, the purpose was to provide a foundation to enhance understanding in a broad context. The basic elements of this primer are summarized in the form of a DSP message at Figure 1.

This is one form a DSP can take. The means ComMarFors use to inform the JFACC of their intent is discretionary and will vary, but the basic elements of the DSP remain constant. While the employment of Marine aviation in a joint environment is a complex undertaking, a DSP is a brief and uncomplicated treatment of the subject. The goal is stating the obvious in clear and unambiguous terms that everyone understands.

Notes

1. Since this article addresses joint doctrine employed by CinCs and JTFs the terms JFC and CinC are considered synonymous. In order to enhance the readability of the article the terms JTF or JFC are used to describe the joint warfighting organization and commander of a force at the joint task force or unified command level.
2. Joint Pub 3.0, Doctrine for Joint Operations, 1 February 1995, pg. II–10.
3. Ibid., pg. II–8.
4. Joint Pub 3–56.1 Command and Control for Joint Air Operations, 14 November 1994, pg. xi.
5. Ibid., pg. IV–2, 3.
6. In practice, the means of conveying the DSP has been successfully completed by use of any of the three methods or combinations thereof.
7. Throughout the article ComMarFor is reference directly to the component commander while MarFor is reference to the component itself. The term ComMarFor and Marine component commander are synonymous.
8. Ibid., pg. IV–9.
9. Ibid., pg. II–1.
10. Ibid., pg. I–1. JP 3–56.1 clearly states: “Joint operations do not include those air operations that a component conducts in direct support of itself.”
11. Ibid., pg. vi. Fully quoted, JP 3–56.1 states: “Only the JFC has the authority to reassign, redirect, or reallocate a component direct support air capabilities and forces.”
12. Joint Pub 0–2, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF), 24 February 1995, pg. IV–4, 5.

13. Joint Pub 3–03, Doctrine for Joint Interdiction Operations (Final Coordination Draft), undated, pg. II–11.

14. Ibid., Joint Pub 0–2, pg. III–11.

15. Ibid., Joint Pub 3.0, pg. IV–15.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------|---|
| AADC | area air defense coordinator |
| ACA | airspace control authority |
| ACE | aviation combat element |
| ACM | airspace control measures |
| AO | area of operations |
| ATO | air tasking order |
| CAS | close air support |
| CinC | commander in chief or unified commander |
| ComMarFor | Marine forces component commander |
| DSP | direct support plan |
| FSCL | fire support coordination line |
| JAOC | joint air operations center |
| JFACC | joint force air component command |
| JFC | joint force commander |
| JITPL | joint integrated prioritized targeting list |
| JTCB | joint targeting coordination board |
| JTF | joint task force |
| MACCS | Marine Air Command and Control System |
| MAGTF | Marine air-ground task force |
| MarFor | Marine Forces |
| MEF | Marine expeditionary force |
| OpCon | operational control |
| TacAir | tactical aviation |

FM: COMMARFOR

TO: JFACC

INFO: COMJTF

SUBJ: MARFOR DIRECT SUPPORT PLAN //

REF A: JOINT PUB 3-56.1/U//

REF B: DOC/OPLAN X/AIR OPERATIONS ANNEX/S//

1. (U) REMARKS: THIS MESSAGE PROVIDES A DESCRIPTION OF COMMARFOR'S DSP IN ACCORDANCE WITH REF (A). THE DSP IS DESIGNED TO ENABLE MARINE COMMANDERS TO EXPLOIT THE VERSATILITY,

RESPONSIVENESS, AND INITIATIVE OF MARFOR ORGANIC AVIATION. IT FULLY SUPPORTS THE JFC'S AUTHORITY TO REASSIGN, REDIRECT, OR REALLOCATE MARFOR DIRECT SUPPORT SORTIES TO HIGHER PRIORITY MISSIONS. ITS ELEMENTS ARE BASED ON THE TENETS OF JOINT DOCTRINE AND JTF SPECIFIC OPERATING PROCEDURES OUTLINED IN REFS (A), AND (B).

2. (U) GENERAL:

A. (U) COMMARFOR WILL RETAIN OPCON OF ITS AVIATION CAPABILITY/FORCES THROUGHOUT THE DURATION OF COMBAT OPERATIONS.

B. (U) PROVIDE LONG-RANGE INTERDICTION, LONG-RANGE RECONNAISSANCE, AND DEFENSIVE COUNTERAIR SORTIES WHEN REQUIRED BY THE JFC.

3. (U) SPECIFIC:

A. (U) BEFORE ASSIGNMENT OF GROUND COMBAT RESPONSIBILITIES, COMMARFOR REQUIRES NO DIRECT SUPPORT SORTIES. ALL AVAILABLE TACAIR SORTIES WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE TO THE JFC FOR TASKING BY THE JFACC IN SUPPORT OF THE JFC CAMPAIGN PLAN.

B. (U) UPON ASSIGNMENT OF GROUND COMBAT RESPONSIBILITIES, IT IS COMMARFOR'S INTENT TO USE HIS ORGANIC AVIATION IN DIRECT SUPPORT OF THE MARFOR ASSIGNED MISSION IN ITS AREA OF OPERATIONS. THUS COMMARFOR WILL:

1) (U) CONSOLIDATE, DECONFLICT, PRIORITIZE, AND NOMINATE TARGETS TO THE JTCB TO BE INCLUDED ON THE JIPTL IN ACCORDANCE WITH REF (A). TARGETS WHICH FALL BETWEEN THE FSCL AND THE FORWARD BOUNDARY IN COMMARFOR'S AO, THAT WILL BE SCHEDULED FOR DELIBERATE ATTACK BY MARFOR DIRECT SUPPORT AIR CAPABILITIES/FORCES, WILL BE PRIORITIZED BY COMMARFOR IN ACCORDANCE WITH REF (A) AND PROVIDED ON A DIRECT SUPPORT TARGET LIST TO THE JTCB FOR DECONFLICTION AND COORDINATION. TARGETS THAT ARE BEYOND THE CAPABILITY OF COMMARFOR TO SOURCE WITHIN THE AREA BETWEEN THE FSCL AND THE FORWARD BOUNDARY (AS WELL AS BEYOND THE FORWARD BOUNDARY) WILL BE SUBMITTED ON A SEPARATE LIST TO COMPETE FOR JTF PRIORITY AND JFACC SOURCING.

(2) (U) PROVIDE A MARFOR GENERATED DIRECT SUPPORT ATO TO MERGE WITH THE JTF ATO VIA CONTINGENCY THEATER AUTOMATED PLANNING SYSTEM DATA.

(3) (U) ALLOCATE SORTIES IN EXCESS OF COMMARFOR'S DIRECT SUPPORT REQUIREMENTS TO THE JFC FOR TASKING BY THE JFACC FOR USE IN EXECUTING JOINT OPERATIONS.

(4) (U) RECOMMEND TO JFACC, AS THE ACA/AADC, AIRSPACE CONTROL MEASURES (ACM) THAT ENHANCE INTEGRATED COMMAND AND CONTROL IN COMMARFOR'S AO/AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY. THE MARFOR WILL ESTABLISH ITS MARINE AIR COMMAND AND CONTROL SYSTEM TO PROVIDE AIRSPACE CONTROL FUNCTIONS IN MARFOR

AIRSPACE CONTROL SECTORS DESIGNATED BY THE ACA. DETAILED AIRSPACE CONTROL INSTRUCTIONS, PLANS, AND PROCEDURES WILL BE DEVELOPED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE AIRSPACE CONTROL PLAN IN REF (B), AND COORDINATED WITH THE ACA TO ENSURE CONSISTENCY WITH JTF AIRSPACE CONTROL GUIDANCE, DIRECTIVES, AND PROCEDURES. COMMARFOR WILL FORWARD ALL ACM REQUESTS TO THE ACA VIA THE MARFOR LIAISON TEAM AT THE JFACC.

4. COMMARFOR HAS EVALUATED HIS REQUIREMENT TO RETAIN SUFFICIENT ORGANIC AIR CAPABILITIES/FORCES DURING OPERATION X. ACCORDINGLY, THIS DSP ALLOWS THE MARFOR TO ACCOMPLISH ITS MISSION AS ASSIGNED BY THE JFC WHILE FULLY COMPLYING WITH THE DIRECTION AND PROCEDURES OUTLINED IN REFS (A) AND (B).

Col Barr retired after 26 years of service as a Marine aviator with broad experience in attack aviation. From 1995 to 1998 he served as the Senior Marine Representative to the Combined Forces Command Targeting Board, Republic of Korea. He recently concluded a tour as Commanding Officer of MCAS Futenma.